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ABSTRACT

In this report, previous studies are reviewed in order to reconsider the assumption that lower class black children are generally deficient in their ability to produce syntactically elaborated speech. Though several studies have seemed to confirm the elaboration-deficiency hypothesis, the evidence presented is not convincing. Specific critiques of previous studies were that they: (1) confounded elaboration with dialect differences; (2) were not sufficiently sensitive to the content and context of sentences; (3) involved questionable decisions as to the elaborateness of syntactic forms; and, (4) were generally too gross to permit adequate interpretation of data. (Author/DM)

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Syntactic Elaboration in the Speech of Lower-Class Black Children: A Review of the Evidence[1]

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this discussion is to reconsider the assumption that lower-class black children are generally deficient in their ability to produce syntactically elaborated speech. Several investigators have reported results which seemed consistent with the elaboration-deficiency hypothesis, but the evidence is not convincing. Specifically, it can be shown that measures of elaboration used in these studies (1) tended to confound elaboration with dialect differences, (2) involved some questionable decisions about the relative elaborateness of various syntactic forms, (3) were not sufficiently sensitive to the content and context of the sentences being analyzed structurally, and (4) were, in general, too gross to permit adequate substantive interpretation of quantitative data. A discussion of these measurement problems has important implications for researchers and educators concerned with the language of young black children.

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Since the early sixties, it has become axiomatic that one should expect to find "language problems" among lower-class children, especially minority children. These language problems are seen as a major factor--if not the root cause--in school failure. Consequently, many a program of compensatory education has set out to improve the language skills of disadvantaged children. In general, this sort of effort has been something less than a resounding success. Perhaps we should reconsider our assumptions in light of the research evidence on language deficits in lower-class children. Perhaps we should begin by reviewing the evidence itself.

One theoretical notion seems to have influenced our assumptions and our research more than any other. It is, of course, Bernstein's (1964) distinction between "elaborated" and "restricted" codes, or ways of speaking. According to a popular version of the theory, lower-class children generally use a restricted code, which means that their sentences tend to be relatively short, grammatically simple, and often incomplete.[2] As a result, these children fail to make their meanings explicit in a way that can be understood by someone who does not have access to the same nonverbal information. Bernstein (1970) claims that dominance of the restricted code can have a profound effect on the lower-class child's intellectual approach to the world around him, thereby causing problems in school.

A number of American studies have turned up evidence which, on the face of it, seems consistent with the hypothesis that lower-class children are deficient in their ability to produce syntactically elaborated speech (e.g. Hess and Shipman, 1965;

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Loban, 1963; Williams and Naremore, 1969b). But I would like to raise some questions about the ways in which syntactic elaboration has been measured in these studies. More often than not, the lower-class subjects in this research have been speakers of Black English, so my remarks will be focussed on the problem of measuring elaboration in the speech of lower-class black children in particular.

At the outset, it is important to heed Bernstein's (1970) warning that there is no inherent connection between a speaker's dialect and his use of the elaborated code. Most researchers have recognized that one cannot simply count dialect deviations from Standard English as evidence of a deficiency in elaboration. We have no reason to believe that the linguistic system which generates such deviations is inferior and is therefore a deficit--except as a social liability when black people are dealing with the white establishment. Unfortunately, however, it sometimes is difficult to untangle dialect phenomena from elaboration per se. This problem has not been recognized sufficiently by the researchers whose work I wish to criticize.

Consider a very simple, but common measure in language behavior research--mean sentence length. There is a certain logic in using sentence length to measure elaboration. After all, the number of words in a sentence does increase with the addition of elaborative words, phrases, or clauses--other things being equal. The problem is that other things are <u>not</u> equal when we compare speakers of different dialects. To take an obvious example, copular forms of <u>be</u> are often realized as a zero morpheme in Black English, as in <u>she my best friend</u>. Such "omissions" do not reduce syntactic complexity, but they do reduce the mean number of words per sentence in the speech of a lower-class black child.[3]

In at least one study (Loban, 1963), the deletion of copular verbs in Black English seems to have affected another syntactic measure associated with the restricted code. I am referring here to the frequency of "incomplete" or "partial" sentences. The

sentence she my best friend contains no verb (at least on the surface) and it might therefore be scored as incomplete. By this criterion, a lower-class child speaking Black English would appear to have more incomplete sentences than his middle-class counterpart--other things being equal. In reality, however, a sentence with the copula deleted is no less complete than a sentence with the copula contracted, as in she's my best friend.[4]

We need measures of elaboration that are more direct and less crude than sentence length or completeness.[5] A count of elaborative elements themselves seems pretty direct. The traditional favorite here is the number of subordinate or dependent clauses. In our current frame of reference, a higher frequency of subordinate clauses would indicate a more elaborative type of speech. But again we may run into snags involving dialect differences. In one of our own interviews, a preschool child said there's a girl live in a house with a cherry tree. We believe this sentence contains a relative clause, even though it lacks the relative pronoun required in Standard English. Thus one must at least be sensitive to the ways in which subordinate clauses are formed in non-standard dialects.

But the counting of subordinate clauses raises an even more fundamental question. What is so special about the clause as an elaborative element? What about infinitive and participial phrases, for instance? Even when researchers have tried to incorporate these other constructions in their measures of subordination, they still have given more weight to clauses (Loban, 1967). While this is not, strictly speaking, a dialect problem, there may be stylistic differences closely related to dialect, such that one group of speakers prefers to elaborate more often with clauses. But is it really less restricted to say the boy who is climbing the tree, as opposed to the boy climbing the tree? Notice that the second construction not only lacks a dependent clause but also has fewer words in it. Instead of counting clauses or words, why not

simply count different types of elaboration and report any differences in frequency between groups of subjects? This can be done without assigning arbitrary weights to various constructions, on the assumption that some are better than others.

It is important to avoid a confusion between the syntactic and lexical aspects of elaboration. Some researchers have counted the number of uncommon adjectives and adverbs as an index of elaboration (e.g. Hess and Shipman, 1965), butthis seems to reflect the richness of the speaker's vocabulary, rather than the use of modification per se. On the other hand, it is also important to examine the lexical content of sentences which are being scored for syntactic elaboration. Sometimes the lexical content has structural implications. The verb put, for example, requires not only a direct object but also a locative word or phrase. That is, we always talk about putting something somewhere. In other places, a locative phrase might be considered an instance of elaboration, but with put it is just a necessary part of the sentence.

It is conceivable that certain groups of subjects, speaking on certain topics, will differ with regard to the frequency of certain lexical contents. There is a very blatant example which seems nonetheless to have been overlooked. It is the response I don't know, which occurs with some regularity in children's interviews, perhaps more often with lower-class children. If I don't know is treated as just another sentence, we find that it contains very few words, no dependent clauses, and no modifiers--uncommon or otherwise. But I submit that the occurrence of I don't know tells us more about a child's readiness to answer questions than about his ability or inclination to produce elaborated speech.

An analysis of syntactic elaboration must consider not only the content of a sentence, but also its context. I can only touch on one aspect of context here, but it is potentially a very important one. In an interview, the immediate context for many of a child's sentences is a direct question or some other request for information.

Other sentences expand upon these immediate responses to questions, or they introduce information which has not been requested by the interviewer. There is some evidence that middle-class children tend to produce more of these expansions and spontaneous remarks (Williams and Naremore, 1969a). In other words, immediate answers to questions probably account for a greater proportion of the sentences produced by lower-class children. This may have more to do with the social psychology of interviews than with a child's language ability.

The point is that direct responses to questions and more spontaneous remarks ought to be analyzed separately in a study of syntactic elaboration, because there may be systematic structural differences between sentences produced in these two contexts. For one thing, the immediate answer to a question tends to be short--often elliptical--because some information has already been made explicit in the question. Furthermore, to the extent that the questions are about the person being interviewed, his immediate answers are likely to be permeated by the personal pronouns I and me, which do not lend themselves to modification by adjectives or adjective phrases. On both of these counts, then, the sentences of a lower-class child would come out looking less elaborated, so long as we ignored the contexts in which they occurred.

In light of this brief review, the evidence for an elaboration deficiency among lower-class children seems rather dubious, especially with regard to lower-class black children. The general thrust of my criticism can be summed up as follows. Existing measures of syntactic elaboration are too open to the influence of other social class differences in language behavior--differences which have little if anything to do with the ability to produce elaborated speech. We must devise measures which get more directly at specific kinds of elaboration, and in ways which are sensitive to dialect and related stylisitic differences, as well as to sentence content and context. Until this is done, we had better regard the elaboration-deficit hypo-

thesis as an open question rather than a safe assumption.

As a postscript, it seems appropriate to ask whether we should really be trying to improve upon the type of study reviewed here, or should simply abandon this approach altogether. For one thing, it has been argued that speech samples collected from conventional interviews just do not provide a good estimate of the language skills which some people have (Labov, 1970; Houston, 1970). I certainly would agree that we need other kinds of speech samples, but I do not think interview data are totally without value either. In any case, I have been discussing issues which would arise in <u>any</u> analysis of syntactic elaboration, regardless of the speech setting. A second argument maintains that the ultimate criterion of language ability lies in some measure of communication effectiveness, not syntactic elaboration. Indeed, too much elaboration may be said to impede communication (Labov, 1970). I agree. But if we look only at measures of effectiveness, we can do no more than identify skilled users of language. In order to understand the nature of their skill, we need a structural analysis of their speech. Thus we are still faced with the problem of measuring something like syntactic elaboration. I hope my comments today represent some progress toward tackling that problem.

Footnotes

1. This paper was prepared for a fifteen-minute presentation at the annual meeting of the California Educational Research Association, San Diego, April 30, 1971. Many of the ideas expressed here were developed in the course of a project supported by the U. S. Office of Economic Opportunity (Contract No. B99-4776). The paper was prepared at the University of California's Institute of Human Learning, which is supported by grants from the National Institutes of Health.

2. The distinction between elaborated and restricted codes is part of a comprehensive sociolinguistic theory. Thus Bernstein has discussed the two codes on several levels, ranging from formal linguistic categories to social and psychological dimensions. However, the present paper is related only to the syntactic contrasts between restricted and elaborated codes.

3. A similar dialect difference occurs with auxilliary forms of be, as in he taking a bath. It might be argued that there are other cases in which the Black English form of a construction contains more words than its Standard English equivalent, as in the "pleonastic" forms discussed by Labov et al (1968). But the frequency of be constructions probably far outweighs the others put together, so that on balance a Black English speaker still ends up with a shorter average sentence.

4. In fact Labov (1970) has suggested that the deletions of be in Black English occur only in those environments where Standard English permits a contraction.

5. In the study by Williams and Naremore (1969b), "a quantitative description of

syntactic elaboration was obtained by use of a modified immediate constituents procedure which provides coding of the structural divisions of English sentences." This procedure has the advantage of identifying the part of a sentence in which elaboration occurs, but it also amounts to counting the number of words per sentence constituent, and therefore it has the same shortcomings as a count of the words in a whole sentence.

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